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## Same processes, different outcomes

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**Abstract:** We welcome Hopwood's proposed "dynamical" framework for understanding how stable patterns of behaviour, thinking, feeling and motivation can come about and self-reinforce. The framework is applicable to both clinical and non-clinical ranges of personality patterns, because underlying processes are likely similar. Specifically, normal individual differences may represent more desirable ranges of equilibria between individuals' psychological states and available (e.g., social) environments than the forms of personality that attract clinical attention. The usefulness of Big Five-like broad personality traits for the framework remains an open question.

Hopwood (this issue) discusses the (lack of) intersection of "normal" and "clinical" approaches to personality research and theory. He also proposes a framework for operationalizing personality-related processes that could unify both approaches: An interpersonal model of personality dynamics.

In the clinical side of this framework, the stable behavioural, cognitive, affective and/or motivational patterns that appear maladaptive are sustained via a) social interactions and b) dynamical psychological processes within individuals that sustain these interactions. The maladaptive patterns are usually considered categorical personality disorders (i.e., types); however, boundaries between different personality disorders are fuzzy, and individuals often meet criteria for multiple disorders. Research on normal personality also tends to focus on stable patterns, but represents them as continuous traits such as the Big Five. Like types, traits are not clear-cut, forming hierarchies with fuzzy boundaries, and selecting the "right" traits to describe individual differences entails arbitrary choices. Despite these differences in how personality is operationalized, Hopwood argues that, fundamentally, normal personality could also be understood in terms of dynamic processes and social interactions, and therefore his framework can be applied to normal personality research, too.

These ideas fit into the broader literature of conceptualizing the individual as a system of causal and homeostatic processes (e.g., Kendler, Zachar, & Craver, 2011; Baumert et al., 2017). From this perspective, individuals are constantly striving for and maintaining equilibria between their psychological states and experiences available to them (e.g., Cramer et al., 2012; Möttus & Allerhand, 2018). When things appear to go wrong, the individual may be stuck in an undesirable equilibrium (a self-reinforcing "attractor state") and the therapeutic goal is to unravel, disrupt, and "re-wire" the processes sustaining it, leading to a healthier, stable attractor state. This brings normal and clinical personality research together: healthy individuals are in more desirable ranges of equilibria (normal individual differences) than those with personality pathologies. Same processes, but different outcomes.

We also welcome the interpersonal framework of personality dynamics because it tackles an underappreciated issue: how to best operationalize psychologically relevant environmental processes (experiences). While not entirely new, Hopwood's notion that a substantial part of the environment amounts to other people provides a useful way forward, especially because environments and people can then be measured using the same attributes and thereby readily matched when their interactions and strives for equilibria are modeled (Möttus & Allerhand, 2017).

But we also see potential extensions of and challenges for the framework.

What about ‘upstream’ causes for the development of personality and personality disorders? When and why do things start going in the right or wrong direction in the first place? One proposed solution has been a general (partly genetically-influenced) liability (p-factor; Caspi et al., 2014), an explanation quite abstract and perhaps somewhat circular. Embracing a general liability factor would seem at odds with Hopwood’s welcome call for specific mechanistic explanations. Another possibility is major life events / transitions, but their roles have been notoriously difficult to identify in normal personality research (Bleidorn, Hopwood, & Lucas, 2018). How could such upstream processes be integrated into the proposed framework?

Translating Hopwood’s framework into empirically-grounded studies may also entail several questions. What data can be used to test the unfolding of the processes delineated in the framework? On what time-scale do the hypothesized variables and processes evolve, how and how often should we assess them, and how exactly are they hypothesized to relate to each other? This is not a criticism, but answers to these questions seem necessary for finding appropriate statistical models to test the processes central to the framework.

Hopwood acknowledges that multiple processes are likely to happen in parallel, whereas our conceptual and statistical models are typically “serial”. This may be a major challenge indeed: if people are to become aligned or misaligned with their social environments, then this is likely to pertain to multiple characteristics at the time, and processes pertaining to one characteristic may spill over to all other processes. One way forward is to start out with a *mathematically formalized theories* (Leeuw, 2004; Smaldino, 2017; Möttus & Allerhand, 2018; Möttus, Allerhand, & Johnson, 2017), including the parameterization of the relationships among variables and processes. Verbalized models can only go so far, even if expressed using beautiful diagrammes.

Regarding the discussion of categories *versus* dimensions, Hopwood seems to argue both ways: after advocating the usefulness and empirical superiority of the Big Five (p. 6), he later implicitly (e.g., p. 24; Figures 1 to 5) or explicitly (e.g., p. 7, p. 29) dispenses with them, and instead illustrates his framework using categorical personality disorders. To us, the question of what exactly the dominant broad traits-based paradigm of normal personality research can offer to the kinds of dynamic frameworks that Hopwood proposes remains unanswered. As it stands, the proposed framework seems to have very little to do with, or benefit from, the Big Five-like traits.

Playing devil’s advocate, one could argue that swapping categorical personality disorders for “evidence-based traits” (p. 6) may amount to jumping from frying pan to the fire: personality traits form fuzzy hierarchies of fuzzy traits, and choosing *the* appropriate traits is just as subjective a decision as deciding on diagnostic criteria for categorical disorders. One has to trade precision (numerous more specific traits) against simplicity (few broader traits). We doubt whether Big Five-like traits would be sufficiently informative to distinguish between clinically different phenomena, and Hopwood seems to agree (p. 7). Also, such broad traits do not necessarily capture the required *level* of dysfunctioning, which may need to be established separately (p. 7), and they likely do a poor job at explaining the underlying dynamics of it. It may be exactly for these reasons that Hopwood makes little use of the Big Five when he illustrates his framework. Instead, he reverts to categorical personality disorders (narcissistic, passive-aggressive, etc.) when discussing representative processes of how maladaptive personality functioning is sustained. We do not wish to mount a defence for personality (disorder) types, but they *do* seem to have at least heuristic value in the description of Hopwood’s framework.

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